

By Alisha Hyslop

# Increase Financial Support for Low-Income Students

THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF A YEARLONG SERIES THAT WILL MORE CLOSELY EXAMINE THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN ACTE'S POSTSECONDARY REFORM POSITION STATEMENT AND HIGHLIGHT BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTING EACH OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS. TO ACCESS THE COMPLETE POSITION STATEMENT, VISIT **WWW.ACTEONLINE.ORG/POLICY/LEGISLATIVE\_ISSUES/POSTSECONDARY.CFM.**

**T**HE SIXTH RECOMMENDATION IN ACTE'S postsecondary reform position statement is to increase financial support for low-income students. Cost barriers and the absence of strategies to increase financial aid often result in fewer opportunities for all students to access postsecondary education. Career and technical education (CTE) programs are particularly affected since data show that a high number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds enroll in postsecondary CTE.

As the price of postsecondary education has increased, the purchasing power of federal and state need-based financial aid has decreased. Need-based grants at the state and federal level (such as federal Pell grants), and at individual institutions, must be increased to help low-income students enjoy the opportunities that education can provide. Financial aid policies should be expanded and revised to provide more support for part-time and working students—including those participating in short-term basic skills and workforce development programs that

do not grant credit—in order to help move these students through the education continuum.

Through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Congress has taken some steps to raise Pell Grant funding and decrease the penalties placed on part-time and working students by many federal student aid programs. However, more must be done (especially by states and local institu-

tions) to ensure that all students have the financial resources to access and succeed in postsecondary education.

## Supporting Students Through Statewide Initiatives

To supplement federal aid programs such as Pell Grants, Illinois has assembled a group of financial aid opportunities for low-income students. The foundation of this financial aid set is Illinois' Monetary Award Program (MAP), awarding more than \$300 million in grants to roughly 128,000 undergraduates annually.

The MAP is a need-based program that covers tuition and fees for low-income Illinois postsecondary students, and is the second largest program of its kind in the country, according to the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. Students must be Illinois residents, enrolled in one of more than 130 approved colleges, and be able to demonstrate financial need through application. The grants are available for the equivalent of 135 credit hours, or until the student has received a bachelor's degree.

The amount of the award for specific students depends on their financial need, the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at their postsecondary institution, the number of hours enrolled, and the amount of funding provided for the program each year. For example, at Illinois Central College, a public community college, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission currently awards between \$500 and \$1,792 for students who qualify for MAP grants.

One of the most unique things about this award is that it is available to students attending school less than half time, making it very beneficial to working students



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who may not be eligible for other financial aid resources. The MAP was expanded to include students taking only a few credits after a study showed that the majority of them were only enrolled less than half time temporarily, and could be just as successful as other students given the appropriate resources. Recently MAP also started supporting year-round study for students not on a traditional schedule.

Illinois' Governor Rod Blagojevich spoke highly of these policy changes when they were announced in the fall of 2004. "We should help students attend college on their own schedule," he said. "By signing this law, students will be able to use MAP grants all year long, based on their credit hours. If a working mom trying to further her education can only take one class instead of three or four, now she will know she has our support and assurance that financial aid will be there when she needs it."

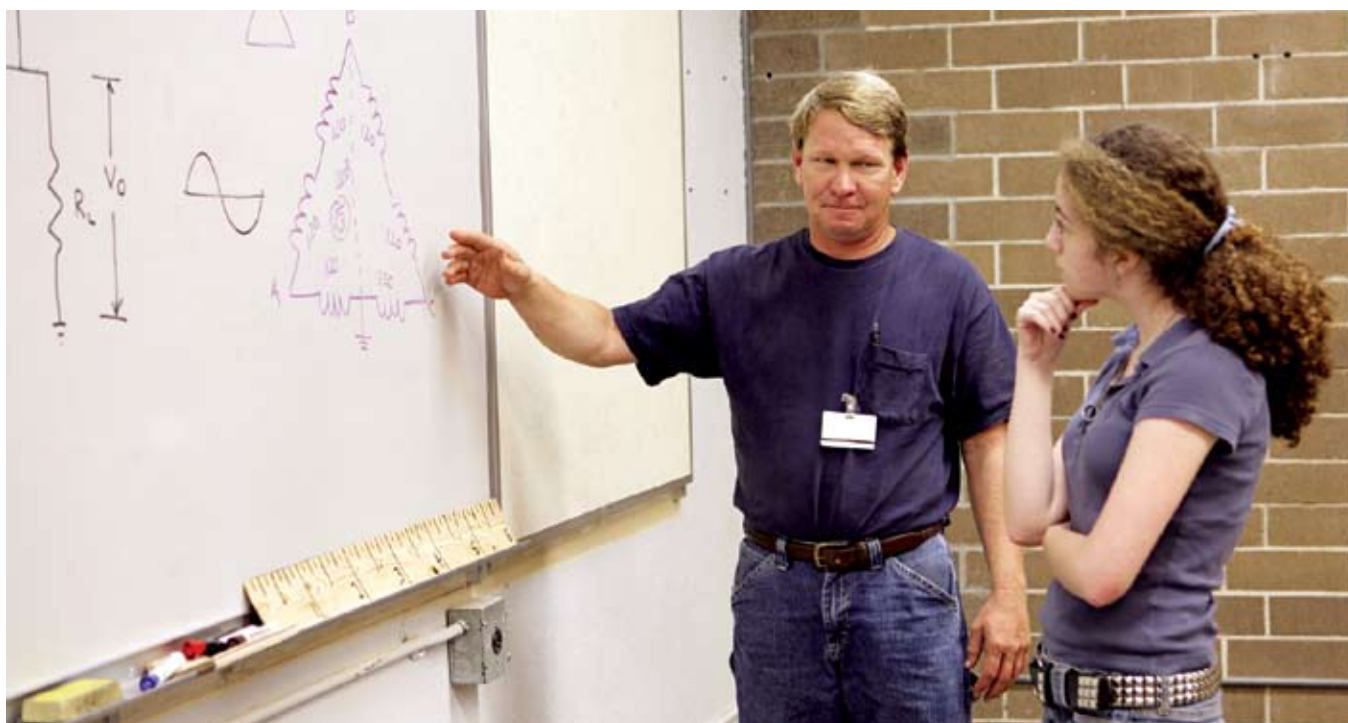
To supplement this program and further encourage the lowest-income students to enroll in college, Illinois also offers the Incentive for Access Grant. This grant is available for freshman students who have received MAP funding, have no "expected family contribution," and are enrolled at least six hours. Students receive an additional \$250 during their first semester and another \$250 during their second semester in college. Funds could increase up to \$1,000 a year if more money was appropriated by the state.

The purpose of this additional grant to the most needy students is to "provide access and retention for this population and, possibly, to reduce their loan debt." These funds provide valuable supplemental resources for students for items such as books, room and board, child care and transportation. The money may even be used for remedial courses if the courses are

part of an approved degree or certificate program in which the student has enrolled.

An additional program authorized in Illinois has the potential to help low-income students succeed even more. While not funded in recent years, the Illinois Higher Education Board has recommended \$4 million for Student Success Grants in Fiscal Year 2009. Funds for this program, if appropriated, would be distributed to community colleges for support programs targeting students who face challenges completing their education.

The funds might be used to offset the costs of personal, academic or career counseling; remediation; assessment; mentoring; or other support services and programs that help students persist to completion. These programs can help students better utilize other individual grants, like the MAP, and make steady progress toward achieving a certificate or degree.



## Encouraging Students to Take the Next Step

Students who complete the GED program at Hinds Community College in Mississippi now have another option to continue into postsecondary education programs at the college. In November 2007, the Hinds Community College Board of Trustees approved a new tuition award and scholarship program to encourage GED recipients to enroll in college-level courses.

Beginning in the spring this year, all GED certificate recipients who are at least 18, are Mississippi residents, and are enrolling in college for the first time, will be eligible for a free three-credit course each semester at any of the college's campuses. Students who score at least a 577 on the GED will be eligible for a larger scholarship that covers the total cost of tuition for a half-time student who is taking at least six hours, or 50 percent of tuition costs for a full-time student. Students may renew these scholarships for up to four semesters if they maintain a 2.5 GPA.

The new financial aid was originally proposed by Hinds Community College President Clyde Muse.

"We want to encourage adults who earned their GED to take the next step and enroll in college," he said. "The GED scholarship program is an investment in helping individuals and families improve their op-

portunities for better jobs and better lives."

Thurman Mitchell, the college's district director of financial aid, reports that approximately 25 students are either receiving the scholarship or the free course award during the spring 2008 semester. A majority of the students are products of the college's GED program, and they are primarily nontraditional students who face many barriers to postsecondary enrollment. The new scholarship program, along with the college's mandatory counseling program, provides them with a unique opportunity to stay on a path to postsecondary success.

Students who may be served by the program include adults like Cassy Kinnard, a 25-year-old mother of three who recently received her GED and wants to return to school.

"I want to go ahead and further my education," she said. "My kids are getting older, and I need to do something better."

She is interested in a medical billing and coding program and needs additional financial assistance to cover the costs.

Allard Barnes, another Hinds GED recipient, wanted to enroll in the automotive mechanics program but did not have the resources to pay for the program. He said the new program would "really help a lot."

The community college is committed to the continued expansion of this

program, and expects more students to take advantage of the new funding available as word spreads. Mitchell is happy with the early results and the assistance that is being provided to students who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to enroll at the postsecondary level. Muse recognizes the importance of increasing college access with this population. "It's an economic issue. This new effort is a step in the right direction, but we need to do more if we want our state to have an educated, competitive workforce," he said.

Illinois' state aid program and that of Hinds Community College go a long way toward helping low-income students bridge the gap between federal resources and the real costs of attending postsecondary education. More states and institutions should place a priority on need-based financial aid programs serving low-income students, so that more students can successfully complete postsecondary education.

ACTE is very interested to learn about other CTE-related initiatives that work toward achieving the remainder of ACTE's postsecondary reform recommendations. If you are involved in such a program, please send information to Alisha Hyslop at [ahyslop@acteonline.org](mailto:ahyslop@acteonline.org). **T**